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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 001037

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/27/2017

TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM TU IR SY

SUBJECT: AKP INSIDER COMMENTS ON MISSIONARIES, TRADE WITH IRAN AND U.S. IMAGE

REF: A. ISTANBUL 353

1B. ANKARA 933

Classified By: Consul General Sharon A. Wiener for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary and comment. Ibrahim Yildirim is a well-connected Justice and Development Party (AK) insider and frequent contact of the consulate, though he holds neither a titled party position nor political office. During an extended conversation, Yildirim said there should be no compulsion in religion, suggested portions of the Koran may be apocryphal, had no ideas for expanding freedoms of expression in the public sphere and said missionary activity was okay in Turkey. He said "everyone" (Europe) trades with Iran; Turkey should therefore not have to sacrifice commercial and energy interests to thwart Iran's nuclear ambition. Yildirim is shocked the U.S. does not attack its image problem in Turkey more aggressively. He said failure to address image issues with more robust PR campaigns that respond directly to charges leveled, such as helping the PKK, will feed the negative image and implies guilt in the minds of Turks. End summary and comment.

ISLAM, FREEDOM OF RELIGION IN TURKEY

12. (C) Commenting on religion in Turkey, Yildirim, referring to the Koran, said there is no compulsion in religion, that Turkey is a secular state with respect to its government and that AKP believes there should be - and is - freedom of religion in Turkey, including space for Christian missionary activity. He noted millions of Muslims across Europe that have freedom to propagate the Muslim faith. Referring to the Koran, he explained that Islam allows a level of self-determination or free will in matters of religious faith. While lamenting the murder of the foreign and local missionaries in Malatya this spring (ref A), Yildirim had no suggestions for ways to create space for open discussion of unpopular ideas.

13. (C) Personally, Yildirim appears sympathetic to the hospitable face of the Fethullah Gulen application of Islamic principles (ref B). Out of the public eye, he is known to enjoy a glass of wine. Discussing the traditionally temperate expression of Islam in Turkish life, he suggested many believe later portions of the Koran itself are apocryphal and not governing for life and practice. This is one reason Turks exhibit greater charity and are less prone to radical Islam than others, he argued.

14. (C) Regarding trade and normal business ties with Iran, Yildirim said everyone's doing it. Why, he wondered, should Turkey suffer economic losses, particularly as a neighbor to Iran? Asked about AKP views on a possible Iranian nuclear weapon, his nuanced response was that Iran had been an essentially peaceful neighbor since Turkic migration to Anatolia began hundreds of years ago. There were many points in common, such as overall religious agreement and practice, some shared customs and outlook. Nevertheless, he pointed out ongoing and historical Turkish suspicion of Iranian intentions, indicating definite rivalry with the Persian neighbor. Iran's acquisition of nuclear weaponry, therefore, is against Turkey's interest. He said, "The international community will take care of it - the United States." Asked what means or tools the U.S. could use to stop acquisition short of military action - which clearly no one wanted - Yildirim's only response was diplomatic pressure. Questioned about diplomatic efficacy with neighbors signing agreements to develop gas fields in Iran, Yildirim had no answer but argued that most Europeans - Germans, Italians, others - were engaged in lucrative deals with Iran. The U.S. should not expect Turkey to deny itself when others carried on business as usual. As have other Turks, Yildirim mentioned Israel's reputed possession of nuclear weapons. As a layman, he made a side comment on the U.S. relationship with Syria, saying Turkey sees the Bashar al Assad presidency very differently from his father's. In comparison to Hafez, Bashar's administration is transparent. Turkey found it difficult to understand the U.S.' continuing distance from Syria.

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U.S. IMAGE IN TURKEY - OR WHAT EVERYONE BELIEVES

15. (C) Yildirim rehearsed strong Turkish perceptions respecting U.S. actions and motivations. Since people think the USG has the ability and resources (ultimate control over media sources in the U.S., from news organizations to cinema and television outlets) to shape, filter and deliver whatever message it wishes to produce, embassy press releases are all but ignored. Embassy press releases responding to headlines "denying allegations that" the U.S. meets with and supplies arms to the PKK are not heard or believed, he explained. Average Turks take popular press reporting as fact and embassy press releases are not seen as a credible response, leaving the damning press reports essentially unchallenged in the mind of Turks. Average and not so average Turks believe the repetitive and amplified press. Turks reason that if the press accounts were not true - and Yildirim himself asked us twice if we were sure the U.S. does not help PKK - the U.S., with all its resources, prestige and power would produce an effective, believable campaign, including its own attention-grabbing news items to discredit the stories. In the absence of a strong, multi-faceted campaign repudiating the charge, the U.S. is judged guilty.

WIENER